

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TAGS: PFOR, PINT, SOPN, UR, US
SUBJ: AT LAST: A SOVIET ACCOUNT OF THE ROSSIYA FIRE

REF: MOSCOW

SUMMARY: TWO MONTHS AFTER THE DISASTROUS FIRE IN
ROSSIYA HOTEL IN MOSCOW, APRIL 20 LITGAZ PROVIDES THE
FIRST DETAILED SOVIET ACCOUNT OF THE FIRE AND MEASURES
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TAKEN IN COMBATting IT. THE ARTICLE REFUTES ALLEGEDLY
TENDENTIOUS AND SLANDEROUS REPORTS IN THE FOREIGN PRESS.
END SUMMARY.

1. LITGAS SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT V. ALEKSANDROV CITES
OFFICIAL RECORDS AND INTERVIEWS WITH OFFICIALS IN
DISPROVING THE ALLEGED SLOWNESS OF FIREMEN IN

RESPONDING TO THE ROSSIYA FIRE AND IN WARNING HOTEL RESIDENTS. ACCORDING TO RECORDS CITED BY ALEKSANDROV, THE FIRST FIRE-FIGHTING EQUIPMENT ARRIVED ON THE SCENE SEVEN MINUTES AFTER RECEIPT OF THE FIRST ALARM. THE LIEUTENANT IN CHARGE OF THESE UNITS IMMEDIATELY REPORTED THAT THE FIRE WAS OF "NO. 5 MAGNITUDE" (I.E., A MAJOR CONFLAGRATION REQUIRING "MAXIMAL FIRE-FIGHTING CAPABILITIES"). SIX MINUTES LATER 38 PIECES OF EQUIPMENT WERE ON THE SCENE INCLUDING HIGH-RISE LADDERS. THE TOTAL NUMBER OF UNITS TAKING PART EVENTUALLY REACHED 143, INCLUDING 1400 FIREMEN. THE FIRE WAS CONTAINED WITHIN ONE HOUR AND FIFTY MINUTES AND COMPLETELY EXTINGUISHED WITHIN TWO HOURS AND 36 MINUTES. A TOTAL OF 463 PERSONS WERE ESCORTED OR CARRIED OUT OF THE BUILDING AND "SEVERAL SCORE" WERE TAKEN TO HOSPITALS FOR EMERGENCY AID. "BUT IT WAS NOT POSSIBLE TO SAVE EVERYBODY, AND AMONG THOSE WHO PERISHED WERE FIVE FOREIGN GUESTS." (NOTE: DESPITE ALL THE DETAILS, THE ARTICLE STILL FAILS TO PROVIDE THE TOTAL NUMBER OF DEATHS.)

2. ALEKSANDROV DESCRIBES HEROISM OF FIREMENT IN SAVING HOTEL GUESTS: THE RESCUE OF 247 PERSONS STRANDED IN THE RESTAURANT ON THE 21ST FLOOR OF THE ROSSIYA TOWER; INSTANCES OF FIREMENT RISKING THEIR LIVES TO SAVE THOSE TRAPPED BY SMOKE OR FIRE; AND LETTERS OF GRATITUDE SUBSEQUENTLY WRITTEN BY GUESTS, INCLUDING ONE BY AN AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN. A TOTAL OF 13 FIREMENT SUSTAINED INJURIES.
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3. THE AUTHOR ALSO CRITICIZES FOREIGN ALLEGATIONS THAT SOVIET AUTHORITIES SOUGHT TO CONCEAL THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE. HIS INTERVIEW WITH THE OFFICIAL CHARGED WITH CONDUCTING THE OFFICIAL INVESTIGATION, STATE COUNSELOR OF JUSTICE, THIRD GRADE, YU. A. ZVEREV OF THE USSR PROCURATOR'S OFFICE, MAKES FOLLOWING POINTS:

-- IT IS PREMATURE TO PINPOINT THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE. THE INVESTIGATION IS CONTINUING AND REQUIRES HUNDREDS OF WITNESSES TO BE INTERVIEWED (UNFORTUNATELY MANY, BEING HOTEL GUESTS, ARE NO LONGER AVAILABLE) AS WELL AS COMPLEX TECHNICAL AND CHEMICAL STUDIES.

-- THE LAW REQUIRES NOT ONLY DETERMINATION OF CAUSE, BUT ALSO RECOMMENDATIONS ON PREVENTATIVE MEASURES TO AVERT POSSIBILITY OF FUTURE SIMILAR FIRES.

4. ALEKSANDROV COMPLAINS THAT THE ROSSIYA FIRE WAS

USED BY HOSTILE FOREIGN CRITICS AS OCCASION TO CONDEMN THE SOVIET SYSTEM IN GENERAL. UNFORTUNATELY, HE NOTES, DISASTROUS HOTEL FIRES DO OCCUR AND NO COUNTRY IS SPARED. HE CITES FIVE RECENT MAJOR FIRES IN WESTERN EUROPE, SOUTH AMERICA, AND THE U.S., SOME OF WHICH WERE DETERMINED BY INVESTIGATORS TO HAVE BEEN CAUSED EITHER BY GROSS NEGLIGENCE, USE OF FLAMMABLE CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS, OR POOR DESIGN.

5. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE DAMAGED WING OF THE ROSSIYA IS REPORTED TO BE WELL UNDER WAY, INCLUDING FOLLOWING MEASURES:

-- INSTALLATION OF ADDITIONAL FIRE-FIGHTING EQUIPMENT AND FIRE ALARMS,

-- CONSTRUCTION OF SMOKE-FREE STAIRWELLS, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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-- WIDER USE OF FIRE RESISTANT MATERIALS,

-- MORE INTENSIVE FIRE-DRILL TRAINING OF HOTEL PERSONNEL.

6. COMMENT: IT IS CHARACTERISTIC THAT WHAT FINALLY PRODDED SOVIET OFFICIALDOM TO PROVIDE DETAILS OF THE FIRE (MINUS THE TOTAL NUMBER OF CASUALTIES) WAS NOT THE NEED TO INFORM THE PUBLIC, BUT THE NEED TO ANSWER FOREIGN CRITICISM. DESIRE TO QUIET CRITICISM AMONG SOVIET ELITE ALSO MAY HAVE PLAYED ROLE. IN OTHER WORDS, THE FIRE IS REPORTED IN LITGAZ -- A LIMITED CIRCULATION WEEKLY -- NOT AS A NEWS EVENT, BUT AS A POLITICAL ISSUE INVOLVING ASPERSIONS AGAINST THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SOVIET SYSTEM. WHAT APPARENTLY DOES NOT OCCUR TO SOVIET BUREAUCRATS IS THAT SOME FOREIGN ALLEGATIONS AND SOME INSTANCES OF INCORRECT REPORTING BY FOREIGN JOURNALISTS COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED BY FULL AND TIMELY "STRAIGHT" NEWS REPORTING BY SOVIET NEWS MEDIA.

7. THE ACCURACY OF THE LITGAZ VERSION OF THE FIRE IS OF COURSE ANOTHER MATTER. EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS HAVE DESCRIBED FIREMEN AS UNDERPREPARED, UNDEREQUIPPED, AND SLUGGISH IN THEIR RESPONSE; EQUIPMENT AS INADEQUATE AND DEFECTIVE; AND THE FIRE AS STILL BURNING FOUR HOURS AFTER IT BROKE OUT. TOON

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